

## SELF HELP GUIDE

**“STRESS  
ANXIETY  
DEPRESSION  
EMOTIONAL  
PROBLEMS”**

### COPE WITH YOUR FEELINGS

“Very good introduction to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and changed my mind about CBT as a therapy – I think now it would help.”

Quote from a seminar participant

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## ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

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This self-help pack has been written to help people to remember and to apply the ideas and coping skills that are described in the 'Manage Your Mind' seminar delivered by Leeds IAPT. It is intended for personal use only. Permission to share copies of this booklet should be requested in writing to the author: [martingroom@nhs.net](mailto:martingroom@nhs.net)

# UNDERSTANDING FEELINGS

## FEELINGS AND THE BRAIN

Emotions are the experience of physical sensations generated by chemicals released in our bodies when we detect threats and rewards. For the purpose of this booklet, feelings and emotions are considered to be the same.

The key points from the video are that:

- There are different emotions. They influence our behaviour.
- Our brain is wired to look for threat and rewards.
- Detection of threat or reward leads to a release of chemicals.
  - Threat leads to the release of adrenaline and cortisol.
  - Reward leads to the release of dopamine, oxytocin and serotonin.
- Feelings can often kick in before thinking and lead to impulsiveness.
- Thinking can sometimes influence emotions unhelpfully.
- Therefore, we can change how we feel by understanding feelings and by changing how we think and behave.

We can take some control of our brain.

Our brain is wired to look out for threat and reward. It is constantly scanning the environment. It does this largely without us being aware. We are generally aware of about 10% of what our brain detects. This is essential because if we were aware of everything it would be like having the radio, the TV, the cinema all on at the same time while going about our daily tasks. Instead the brain is set up efficiently to bring to our attention only the things that seem important (i.e. things that are threatening or things that are rewarding.)

### TIPS

**In the seminar we watched a video clip explaining what emotions are. To watch the video clip again type 'sentis brain animation' into YouTube. Here you will find this clip and at least five others. They are all recommended and show how thoughts, physical sensations, feelings, behaviour and attention can be understood by knowing how the brain works.**

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Exactly what your brain or mind is scanning for will depend partly on what your current concerns are. For example, if you are concerned with buying a house you will notice for sale signs. If you are nervous in a social situation you may scan for threat (people being critical) or for some reward (a way out of the situation or someone you feel more comfortable to talk to). This is normal and part of how your brain works. However because attention and perception happen before thinking, we often experience strong feelings without knowing why. Strong feelings can seem to come out of the blue. This creates uncertainty and confusion and the whole experience can get a little scary.

This process is very common in panic attacks. For example, without really being aware, my brain detects a sinking feeling in my stomach as I pull away in the car. Immediately I feel really anxious but don't know why. I then start to think about the reason why but because I am anxious I come to a catastrophic idea – I'm losing control of the car. This idea is in itself 'threatening', and my brain detects this. I become more anxious and panic sets in.

Knowing that this process happens and is normal can make sense of our experience. That is, it is normal and understandable to have strong feelings without really understanding why because our brain is hardwired to scan for threat, it does this automatically and activates emotions before thinking has time to catch up.

Even when thinking does catch up, our brain is not so good at telling the difference between a thought (and image / memory) and a real thing. This can be useful to know. It explains why, when we think about things we can get a real 'feeling' for what we are imagining. Try this now: close your eyes and imagine / think about fresh bread baking.

Did you do it? If not, give it a try.

What did you notice? Could you almost smell the bread? Did your mouth water?

Just like if you are walking around a supermarket and you smell fresh bread, thinking about fresh bread activates the same parts of your brain. We take this amazing quality of imagination for granted. A similar process occurs when we start to think about things that worry us or we think about something about which we feel guilty or ashamed. Regardless of whether the thought or memory

is 'true' or 'accurate' we will have an emotional response. The thought sets off feeling. This happens even if we know something isn't true. Having a thought will tend to activate the part of our brain responsible for feelings.

For example, if we think we've done something wrong, we will feel a bit guilty. Even if we haven't! This is normal.

This point about our brains not being very good at telling the difference between a thought and a thing is illustrated in the cartoon below. The two men believe the word moon on the sign is actually the moon. Of course the word (or sign for moon) isn't as bright as they expected. They don't know they are looking at a sign of the moon and not the moon.

This is just like those times when we don't know we are confusing a thought about something with the real thing. For example, it is easy to confuse a worry that something is going to go wrong (a prediction), with something actually going wrong. As the brain works in this way both worry and something going wrong lead to anxiety.

The main points to remember are:

- This is normal.
- We don't tend to know this or realise this is going on (they don't teach this stuff in school!).
- Knowing this can be helpful because it can make sense of why we have strong feelings.



## DIFFERENT SORTS OF FEELINGS

When it comes to feelings, there are lots of theories and not so many facts. However it is generally agreed that:

- Feelings can be sorted into primary or basic types and secondary types.
- We have feelings because they serve a purpose for us as a species. That is, like all aspects of the body, "it is how it is" because it has a useful purpose that helps us humans survive and thrive. In other words, our feelings have evolved because they are useful.

## BASIC FEELINGS

By basic or primary feelings we mean the ones that tend to come very quickly, often without thinking about things too much. The table below shows a list of these basic feelings written in blue along with some possible use or purpose for that feeling.

It is worth noticing that in all the examples the feeling becomes useful if it leads to a certain type of behaviour. A behaviour which is going to help us humans to thrive and survive.

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BASIC EMOTION	POSSIBLE USEFULNESS OR PURPOSE
<b>Trust</b>	Leads to tribal sharing and collaboration
<b>Fear</b>	Leads to flight (escape) from danger
<b>Surprise</b>	Leads to pausing to think and learn
<b>Anger</b>	Leads to fighting competitors or predators
<b>Joy</b>	Results in seeking good things again
<b>Love</b>	Leads to strong bonds of attachment

## SECONDARY FEELINGS

By *secondary* or *complex* feelings or emotions, we mean the feelings that come after we have thought more about the situation or the feelings. The table below gives some suggestions about why we have these feelings or how having such feelings might be useful for us.

SECONDARY FEELING	POSSIBLE USEFULNESS OR PURPOSE
<b>Disgust</b>	Disgust stops you eating and touching harmful things e.g. poo
<b>Guilt/Shame</b>	Guilt / shame can lead to repairing a relationship
<b>Envy</b>	Envy can motivate
<b>Disappointment</b>	Disappointment can tell you what matters to you
<b>Optimism</b>	Optimism can motivate you to do something

In summary, emotions / feelings are normal. Basic emotion happens quickly, quite automatically. Complex or secondary emotions happen a little later when we think about things and decide what they mean to us.

Emotions are the experience of physical sensations generated by chemicals released in our bodies when we detect threats and rewards. Understanding why and how we have feelings can be helpful. It can help us make sense of our experience. Generally, feelings can be useful because they can:

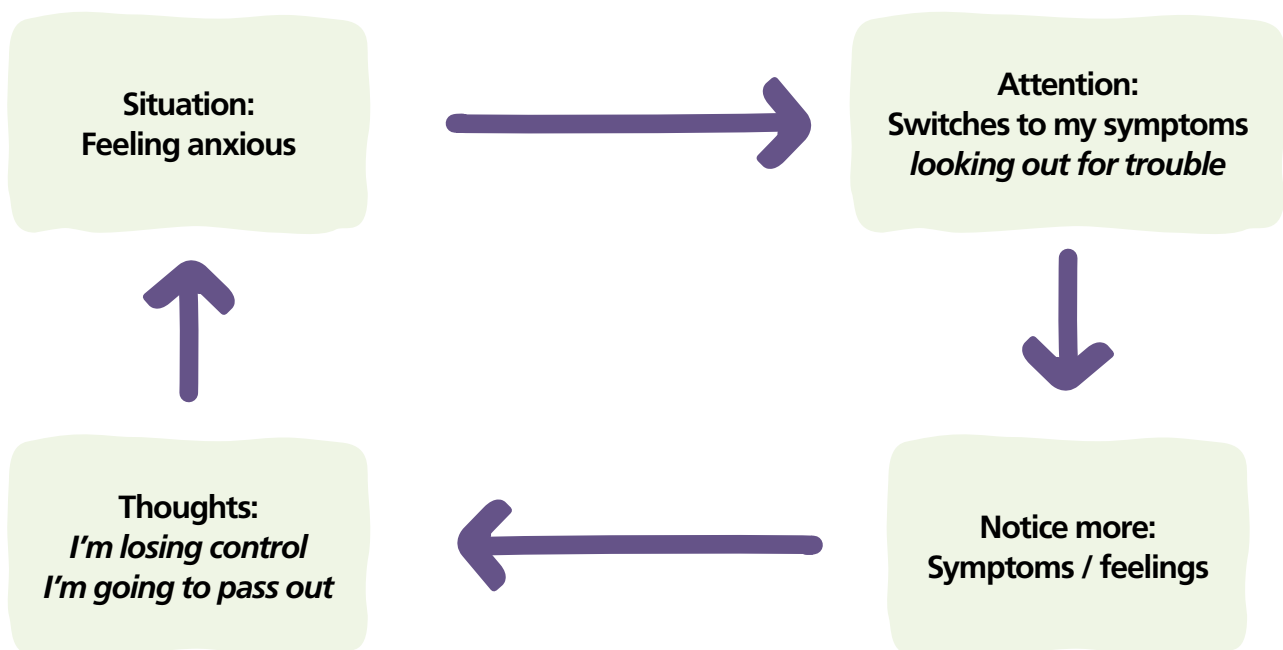
- Provide information about our goals, our values, our lives.
- Can lead to problem solving.
- Help keep us keep safe – *fight or flight*.

However, because of the way our minds work we can have strong basic feelings apparently out of the blue. We can also have strong complex feelings when we think about things in the past, the present and the future.

### COMMON IDEAS ABOUT EMOTIONS

The ideas we hold about feelings or emotions, in other words what feelings mean to us, influence how we think about feelings when they show up. For example, we'll have ideas about whether or not we like certain feelings or not. We may think of certain emotions as a threat and others as something useful. As our brains are set up to detect threat and reward, if we think that certain feelings are threatening this may in itself lead to more of the feeling we don't want! For example, the idea that:

#### EMOTION IS DANGEROUS



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In this example the feeling of anxiety is noticed and labelled as 'trouble'. Once your attention is on this feeling, it may seem like we have more of it. We may then start to have scarier thoughts like "I'm losing control" which in turn leads to more anxiety. We all have ideas about feelings, but we may not be that aware of them. Becoming more aware of our feelings and the ideas we hold about our feelings can help make sense of experiences like the one outlined above. If we understand it better it can make it less threatening and we may be able to begin to consider other less threatening ways of thinking about our feelings.

Here's a list of very common ideas people have about feelings:

- I should / shouldn't be feeling like this. These feelings will never stop.
- Feelings should be understandable.
- Having this feeling means I am a bad / weak person.
- Expressing this emotion means others will get hurt /others will reject me.
- If I feel affection for someone, I shouldn't feel anger or disappointment.

In the seminar we heard two exaggerated stories about Will and Michael who were both in love and the relationship had broken up. They both held very different ideas about feelings and how to respond to them. Here are the two stories. Read this and once again try to notice:

- The ideas that you hold about feelings.
- How these ideas influence how Will and Michael behave. For example, how much they spend dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.

Will and Michael both learn that their girlfriends and partners – both, coincidentally, named Mary have just dumped them. Will, frustrated in his goal of having the perfect romance, notices that he has become emotionally uncomfortable with this news. He recognises that he is upset, but he has a hard time labelling the feelings. He notices that he is feeling angry, but he believes that he should not be angry with someone he thinks he loves. He is afraid of expressing this anger, believing if Mary finds out she will close off any chance of getting back together. He believes that he cannot share his anger and sadness with others, because people might view him as a burden. He finds it hard to understand why he is so sad, since he has only known Mary for two months, and he feels ashamed of being so dependent on her. He is further confused, since he can't make sense of having two conflicting emotions, believing that you "either love someone or you hate them but never both."



Will is afraid that his sadness and anger might get out of control, so he worries about his feelings and thinks his unhappiness will last forever. He wonders if he is the entire cause of his unhappiness, believing that he does not have a right to be angry. He criticizes himself for being so 'needy' and views his desire for Mary as a sign of his inferiority as a man. Will sits in his apartment, sipping a drink, focusing on how bad he is, reading his religious book asking God, "Why me?"

He no longer spends time with his friends and he has missed work. Sometimes he wishes that he could just feel numb and he finds that a few scotches will do the trick. Will looks at his worries as a sign of his weakness, claiming to himself that since he has a law degree, he should always be rational. He fears that his strong negative feelings will persist into the summer, ruining his experiences at the beach house that he dreamed of sharing with Mary. Will is certain that no one shares these pathetic and confusing feelings and is therefore reluctant to share them with others.

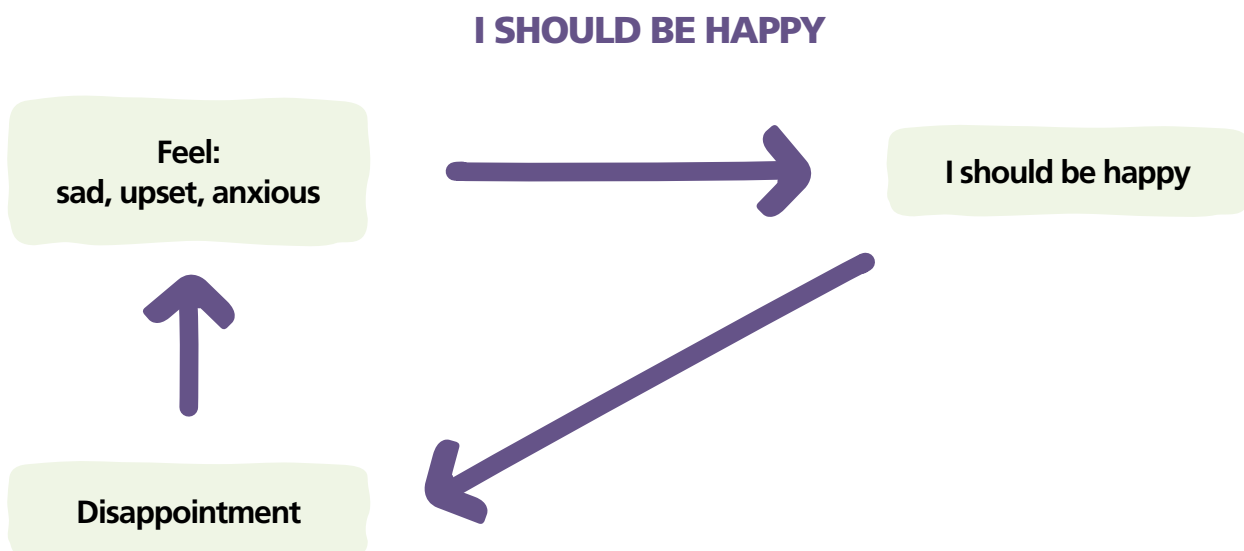
In contrast, Michael is aware of his range of feelings – anger, anxiety, sadness, and even a touch of hope. Initially upset with the news that Mary is gone, he recognised his feelings were neither positive nor negative, but simply human feelings are a sign that he is alive. That feelings that he likes and feelings that he doesn't like regarding Mary are two sides of the same coin.

He is currently having dinner with his friend Ed, with whom Michael feels confident that he can express his feelings and have a receptive audience. Michael finds that this expression helps him clarify his feelings, recognize that others might feel the same way, and helps him see that he has a right to feel a range of things. He recognizes that with the breakup, it makes sense to have conflicting feelings, because life and relationships are complicated. Therefore, he feels sad because he is losing a partner, angry because of her carelessness in telling him by e-mail, and relieved because she was 'high maintenance' to begin with. Even though he may feel intense sadness at times, he knows that these feelings will not overwhelm him, they can be controlled to some extent, and that they will not last forever. Consequently, although he enjoys a Guinness with Ed, he does not feel a need to numb himself with a drinking binge. He feels sad and recognises, (because intimacy and commitment are important to him) that although he will not have that with Mary, he will look for it with someone else. Rather than sit at home dwelling too much about his situation, he has planned a number of possibly productive experiences, such as seeing friends, exercising, work, and a date with Jane. Michael likes to think of himself as rational, but he also balances this with the awareness that, like other people, he will feel badly after a breakup, but that the feelings are simply a sign of being a human.

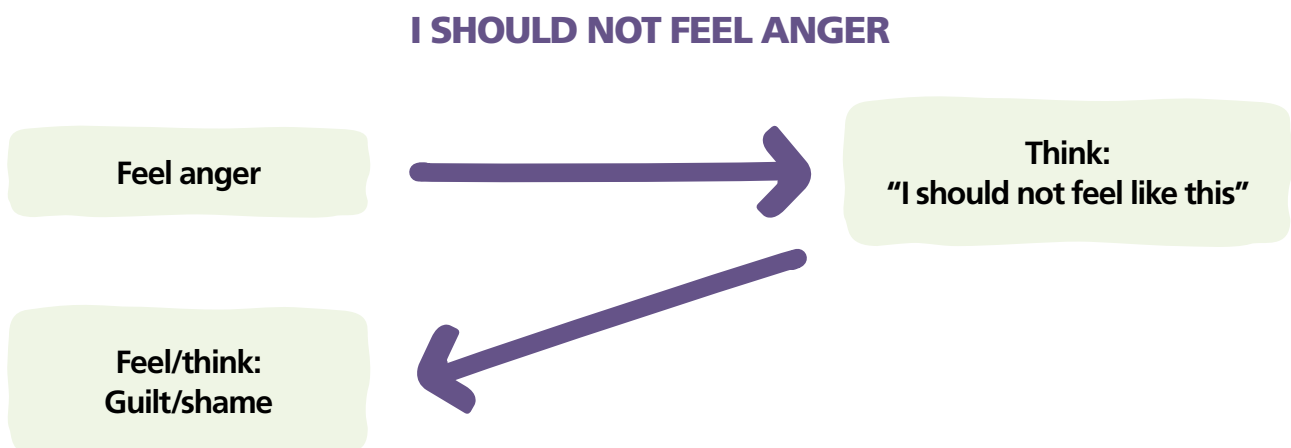
## WHAT KEEPS UNWANTED FEELINGS GOING?

In CBT a main focus is on understanding what keeps things going. This is true of the stuff you wish to change and the stuff you wish to keep or do more of. Later we'll look at how you might get more of the feelings you want and how to keep these feelings going.

First, let's look at understanding what keeps unwanted feelings going. One reason unwanted feelings keep going has to do with the ideas we have about feelings and often how we behave as a consequence. For example, holding the idea 'I should be happy' might lead to disappointment, like this:

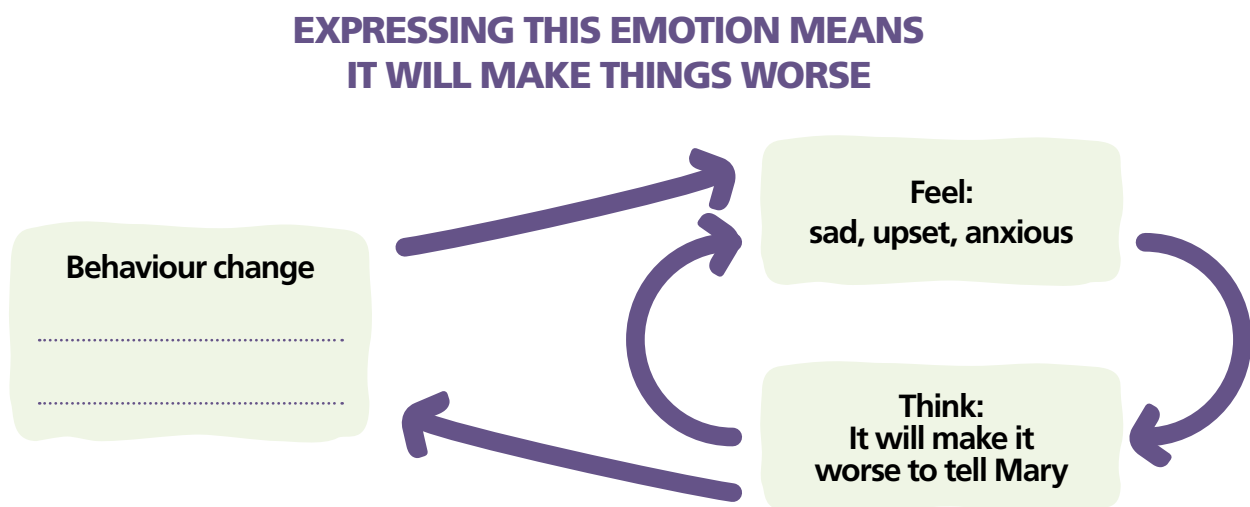


While the idea 'I shouldn't feel angry' might lead to something like this:



A common idea which keeps unwanted feelings going is the idea that, “when I’m feeling better ... I’ll do something”. For example, when I’m feeling better I’ll call a friend, or tackle that problem, or go to the gym. The trouble with this is the ‘something we are putting off’ may be the thing we need to do to start to feel better. A Catch 22 situation.

If we fear what will happen if we express or talk about our feelings, this too can be problematic. For example:



Of course in some situations this idea may be true. That is it might make it worse to talk about it. However, holding this idea too rigidly and across all situations will probably lead to keeping unwanted feelings going. Often this happens because of an understandable but unhelpful change in behaviour. For example, in our stories, Will used alcohol to numb his feelings and avoided telling others how he felt. Both these behaviours had unintended consequences which led to more unwanted feelings.

Here’s a list of common understandable behaviours which may keep unwanted feelings going:

### **WHAT SORT OF BEHAVIOURS MIGHT KEEP UNWANTED BEHAVIOURS GOING**

**Avoidance**

**Numbing**

**Suppression**

**Worry and dwelling**

**Not solving a problem**

**Keep doing the same thing**

**Not doing enough of what matters / makes us feel good**

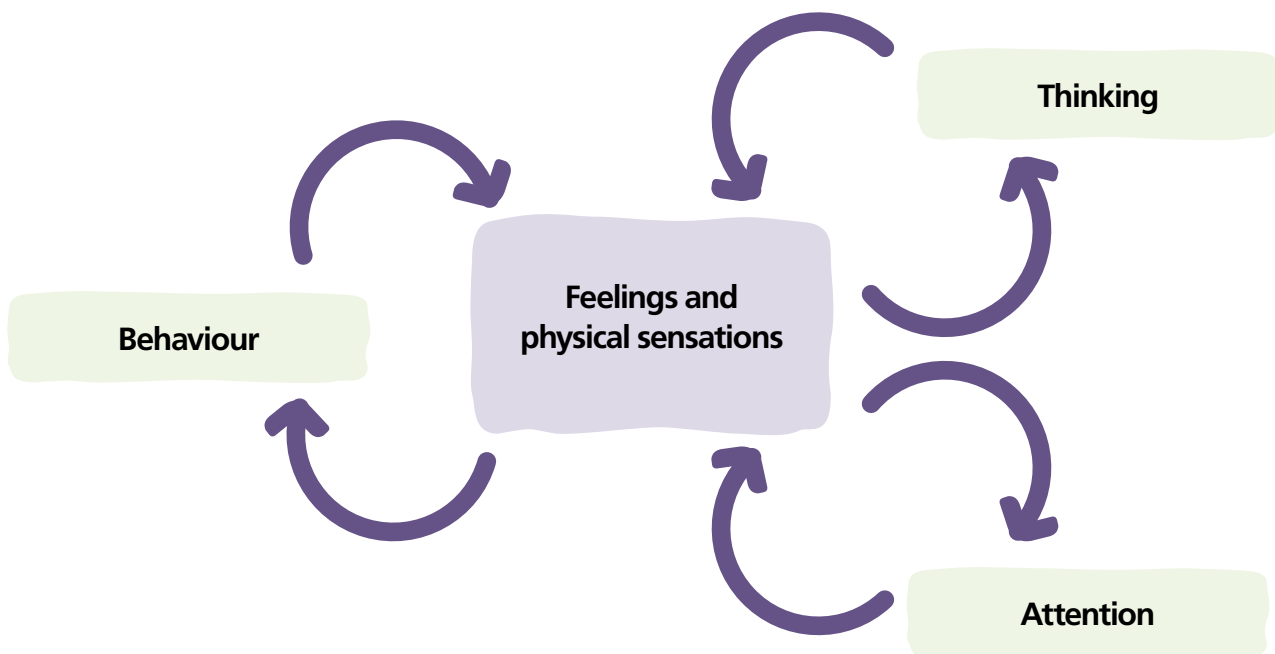
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While understandable, if these behaviours are used excessively they keep unwanted feelings going because:

- Doing less of what makes us feel happy makes us feel less happy. Situations remain unchanged or changed in unhelpful ways.
- We look out for trouble – attention / noticing.
- We don't learn or find out how the world really is; instead we remain fixed with unhelpful ideas about ourselves or the world.
- We don't get used to the situation or the feelings.

So putting all this together, We can make sense of vicious cycles of unwanted feelings by understanding how we think, where our attention is, how our brains work and how we behave. All together, it can look a bit like this diagram, often called a formulation in CBT.

Understanding what feelings and physical sensations are and how they link to attention, thoughts and behaviour can help cope with feelings. Let's now look at changing behaviour, attention, thinking or the situations where these happen to feel better or cope better with how we feel.



## WAYS TO FEEL BETTER, OR TO COPE BETTER WITH HOW WE FEEL.

Understanding what feelings are, and what keeps unwanted feelings going may already be helping you to cope a little better with how you feel, or even giving you some ideas about how to change how you feel.

Let's look at some ways to take this further. The seminar touches on these main areas:

- Change the situation or what you do in that situation.
- Accept and get used to situations or the feelings.
- Notice how you think about the situation or your feelings and think differently.
- Shift your attention towards or away from feelings or the situation

This can be simplified to four main areas:

- 1. Situations and behaviours**
- 2. Attention**
- 3. Thoughts**
- 4. Acceptance.**

### TIPS

Do more of what makes you feel good or what matters.

### 1. SITUATIONS AND BEHAVIOURS

Traditionally psychological therapies have focused a lot on problematic thoughts and feelings. Therapies try to help you feel better, solve problems or make the problem smaller. This is helpful and research in the field supports this. Increasingly however, the research also suggests that making room for the problem and building and growing your life around it, also works.

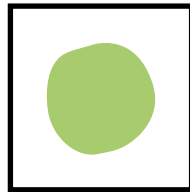
A good question to ask yourself to make sense of this is:

If you had the same amount of difficult feelings in your life but overall the things that matter in your life were bigger and better, what would that be like?

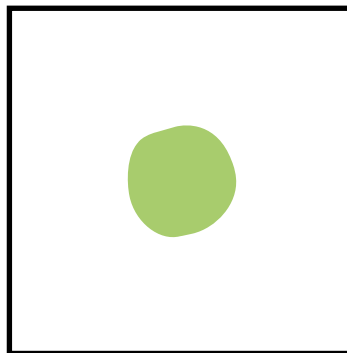
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Something like this:

In the diagram below the green dot represents life problems and the feelings related to them. The space around the dot represents your life, the things you do.



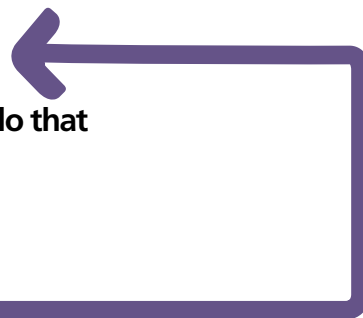
What if the problem and the feelings didn't change but the life around the problem and the feelings got bigger? If you did more of the things that mattered, things that made you feel 'good'.



Imagining doing this can feel overwhelming, but having a method to achieve this can make it seem more realistic. Something like this:

## FIVE STEPS TO FEELING BETTER

- Set a specific and realistic goal of how you want to feel
- Brainstorm possibilities of situations / things that could do that
- Choose a strategy ... how ...
- Make a specific plan ... **What? Where? Who?**
- Carry it out and evaluate and then go back to...



As you are trying to do this, you might notice that your mind is coming up with thoughts like "Why should I have to do this?" or "Why can't I just do it like I used to?" This is common and to be expected. It's unlikely your mind will stop doing this. However, try not to let such thoughts stop you from giving this a fair trial.

When we are stressed out or overwhelmed we can think of situations in an 'all or nothing' or 'black and white' kind of way. We can convince ourselves that there is no other way of making a situation more manageable. However, by allowing yourself to think about a situation that bothers you and considering how to change it, you may come up with an alternative. For example, you get stressed about conflict, having a difficult conversation might be something you avoid or put off. Recognising this and changing the situation may make it more manageable. So for me, rather than talking to my neighbour to ask him not to park his car so close to my driveway straight after work, I can do things differently. I can wait until after I have put the kids to bed and he has had his tea and a rest. I can go round to his house and sit down rather than talk out on the driveway. I can tell him how I feel and why it matters (worried about getting hit by a car when I pull out and the kids getting hurt) before asking him, rather than just asking him straight out. This real example didn't stop me from feeling anxious about asking him, but it did make it more possible and I didn't put it off for so long.

Like all the suggestions here, changing situations or behaviours may not be easy and we are not suggesting that it is. Rather, what often makes CBT more successful is realising that it may be hard, but that through effort and practice it will be worth it.

## TIPS

**Change a situation to make it more manageable.**

## 2. ATTENTION

The radio metaphor is a way of understanding and practicing this. Here's the script we used in the seminar.

### ANXIETY NEWS RADIO

Welcome to Anxiety News Radio, broadcasting inside your head 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It's the station you've grown up with, and comes to you automatically, 24/7. Anxiety News Radio is compelling listening, and guess why! When you wake in the early hours, we'll be there to make you aware of all the unhappy aspects of your life, even before you get out of bed. We'll bring you all the things that you find most disturbing and distressing- any time, anywhere. So don't forget that, and if you should forget and act without seeking permission, then we'll broadcast all the louder. Our mission is to drown out your values. Our goal is to take over and control your life. Pay attention! Anxiety News Radio knows what's best for you. We guarantee that our products will pull you out of your life in a flash. Remember: what you think and feel inside your skin can be really awful. So stay tuned. We know how to keep people stuck.

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## JUST SO RADIO

Wake up! Anxiety News Radio is just a station-you can tune in or you can tune out! One thing is guaranteed though. Whatever the time of day, you'll hear the same old stuff on Anxiety News radio. If that's been helpful to you, then go ahead, tune in and stay tuned. If not, then tune in more often to Just So Radio. We bring you the news about your experience, in the moment, all live, as it is, all the time. Living well is our business! We'll give it to you straight – real experience as it is, not as what your mind says it is. We'll bring you into full contact with the world outside and inside your skin. We'll help you wake up to your life and your experiences as a human being – and it's entirely free. Our listeners tell us that tuning in to Just So Radio is vital and can even bring you joy. Just So Radio brings you information about how things are, not how you fear they might be. Just So Radio invites you to step forward and touch the world, just as it is, and to touch your life, just as it is. We get louder the more you listen to us. So stay tuned. Give us a fair trial, and if not convinced by your own experience (please don't take our word for it), then Anxiety News radio is still there.

## TIPS

**Notice where your attention is and place it where you want it.**

An idea with this is that difficult feelings, especially anxiety can be thought of as a radio station. It's always there on the dial. However, you have some control about how tuned in you are. Anxiety News Radio (or it could be for you *'Radio Guilt'* or *'Radio Awful'* etc.) competes for your attention through for example, negative thoughts. This radio station takes your attention away from another radio station- *'Just So radio'*.

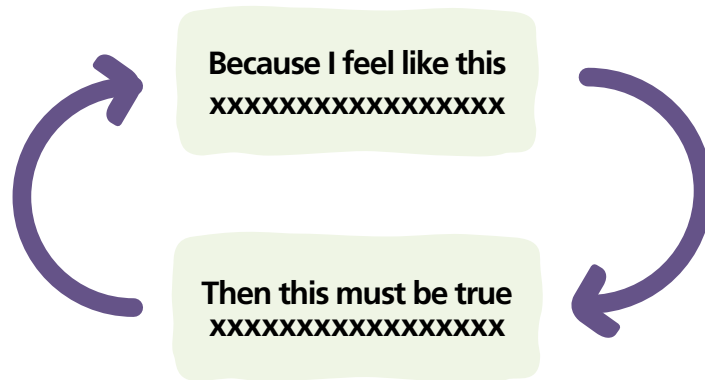
*'Just So Radio'* isn't about broadcasting good or happy thoughts. Rather it is concerned with broadcasting what's really happening right now in the present moment. It too competes for your attention but does so in a fair way and tries to report how things really are, right now. It tries to encourage you to spread your attention around what you can see, touch, smell, hear, etc. as well as the feelings going on in your body. If you are tuned in to *'just so radio'* when you are doing something that matters (reading with your kids, going to the pub, out for a walk, tasks at work etc.), your attention may be more on what's really happening including how you feel. However, if you are doing things while tuned into *'Anxiety News Radio'* your attention will tend to be much more on your thoughts and feelings and much less on what's really happening in the here and now.



### 3. THOUGHTS

When we are emotional, especially when feelings are strong, the way we think about things tends to change. Specifically the way we reason changes. This is called emotional reasoning and we are often unaware that we are doing it. Understanding emotional reasoning and becoming aware of when it is happening can help us step back from our thoughts and consider alternative reasons for things. If we can do this we may make better decisions.

Emotional reasoning looks like this:



For example:

**If I feel guilty – then *this must be my fault.***

**If I feel angry – then *this must be YOUR fault.***

**If I feel anxious – then I must be in **danger** or being threatened.**

The thing is, we often don't realise we are doing this until perhaps our feelings change again. To help cope with negative thoughts when we are emotional, try following this check list:

- Am I emotionally reasoning? How?
- Am I confusing a thought for an emotion?
- What would a friend say about this?
- What's an alternative way of looking at this?
- What is the worst thing that could happen?

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It may be that if you try this it will help a lot. It may be that it won't help at all! The important thing is to try it and to give it a fair trial. That is, try it a few times. Very often this kind of technique will help a bit but people comment something like – “I know this already with my head – I just don't believe it with my heart” or “I know it's not true – but it just feels true!”

This head and heart split is very common. To believe things at the heart level we usually have to test out the idea through a change in our behaviour. So for example, if when angry we think someone has been doing something to intentionally annoy us, it's only by checking this out, say by talking about it we'll find out and then believe that this is not the case.

## 4. ACCEPTANCE AND GETTING USED TO THINGS

Whatever feelings you have about a situation, a large body of research demonstrates that if we give ourselves a chance, we get used to situations. The jargon for getting used to things is 'habituation'. Before we look at distressing situations, let's consider this idea of getting used to or habituating to things or situations that bring you satisfaction or pleasure.

In his book *Stumbling on Happiness* Daniel Gilbert writes:

*Among life's cruellest truths is this one: wonderful things are especially wonderful the first time they happen, but their wonderfulness wanes with repetition. Just compare the first and last time your child said “mummy” or your partner said, “I love you” and you know exactly what I mean. We have experience – hearing a particular song, tasting something for the first time, watching a TV show, travelling on a plane – on successive occasions ... experience yields less pleasure each time. Psychologists call this habituation, economists call it declining marginal utility, and the rest of us call it marriage.*

If our goal is to feel good, it's useful to know about habituation. It can explain why we don't get as much pleasure from things we do very often or why we get bored. This is why people often save things for special occasions. We know that to keep things special and feeling fresh and rewarding, we can't do them too often. Another way to keep things fresh and rewarding is to change and keep changing some of the things you do – do new things / go to new places / meet new people etc. – or to do things differently. For example, let your partner drive, do something else on a Saturday night. By doing this, you stop yourself habituating to the things that make you feel good and keep things feeling fresh, satisfying and rewarding.

### TIPS

**Decide now on one thing to do this week which is either new or done differently and give it a try.**

## **GETTING USED TO THINGS WE FIND DISTRESSING**

Exposure therapy is part of CBT. It comes from behaviour therapy and is perhaps the most well researched and evidenced approach. It too uses the habituation principle. That is, the tried and tested idea that given the right conditions we humans get used to situations and the distressing feelings that show up. Often when we imagine being put in the situation we fear, we start to think that our feelings will go up and up endlessly. This idea can prevent us from facing up to situations and getting used to them. However, although understandable, this idea is incorrect. If we remain in a situation that is not objectively dangerous (flying, going to a meeting at work, travelling on a bus etc.), our anxiety and / or other distressing emotions will lessen in intensity and duration. That is feelings will be less severe and last for a shorter and shorter time.

Three factors influence how quickly and how thoroughly we get used to a distressing situation.

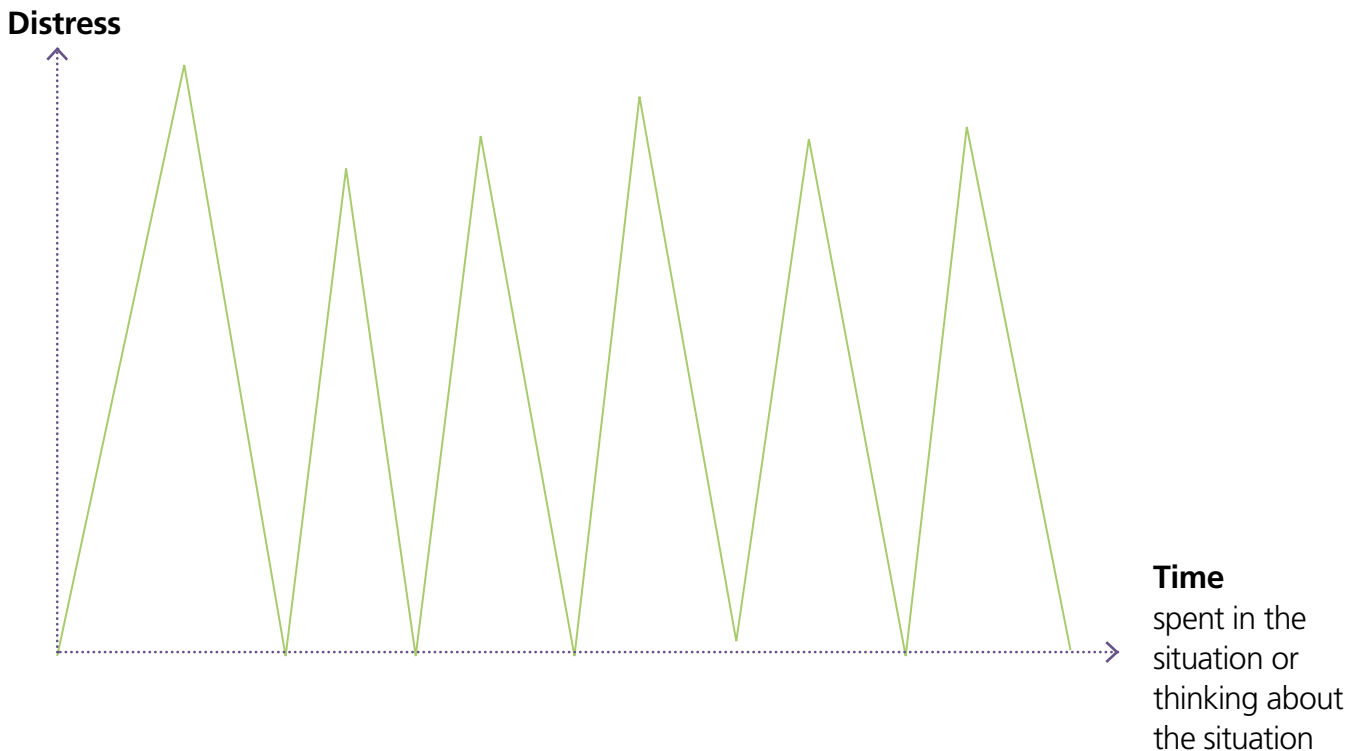
1. How long we are exposed (or remain in) to the situation we find distressing.
2. How much we are exposed (it won't work so well if we distract ourselves or numb feelings e.g. count backwards, act differently or use alcohol).
3. How often we expose ourselves to the feared situation (daily is ideal). This is sometimes called the frequency of exposure.

## **WHAT STOPS PEOPLE FROM GETTING USED TO SITUATIONS AND THE DIFFICULT THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS THAT ARE TRIGGERED?**

Often this is due to unhelpful yet very understandable avoidance.

The graph overleaf shows what tends to happen if we get stuck in an approach / avoid cycle. That is, we think about doing the thing we fear or upsets us or even start to approach it. We rapidly get anxious or emotional. We stop, withdraw or use small avoidances or safety seeking strategies in situations. For example, our distress is to do with going to the supermarket. We go, but we rush and avoid eye contact. Or, perhaps our distress relates to telling people how we really are. We go to the café or to Mosque, but we avoid telling people that we've had a really tough day and what's bothering us. This may mean we don't get used to the situation of telling people how we are. Because of this, next time it crops up we have similar thoughts and feelings to a similar level of intensity. On a graph it looks like this.

## THE APPROACH / AVOID CYCLE



This is really common and often we keep doing it because in the short term it works. That is each time we avoid we get some relief. However, in the long term it stops us from getting used to (habituating) to the unwanted thoughts and feelings.

### HOW TO GET USED TO THINGS USING EXPOSURE THERAPY

**Step 1:** Try to understand and work out what is stopping you from getting used to things. What are you avoiding? What are your safety seeking behaviours?

**Step 2:** Write down the thing or things you are avoiding and organise them into a deep end / shallow end list. That is, the things that you would find most difficult to stop avoiding at the deep end and the easier ones at the shallow end. Pick one that you are motivated to change, probably from the shallow end. If it still seems too scary to change that's ok. Break this one down into smaller steps.

**Step 3:** Plan when you are going to start and commit to it. Expect to feel distress at the beginning and apply the things we know help people get used to things. Remain in the situation for long enough for the distress to reduce by half. Expose yourself to the situation and feelings as fully as you can (don't distract, rush etc.) and repeat often.

**Step 4:** Record your progress by writing down what you are exposing yourself to (the situation and or the feelings), how long you are in the situation and what happens to your distress over time.

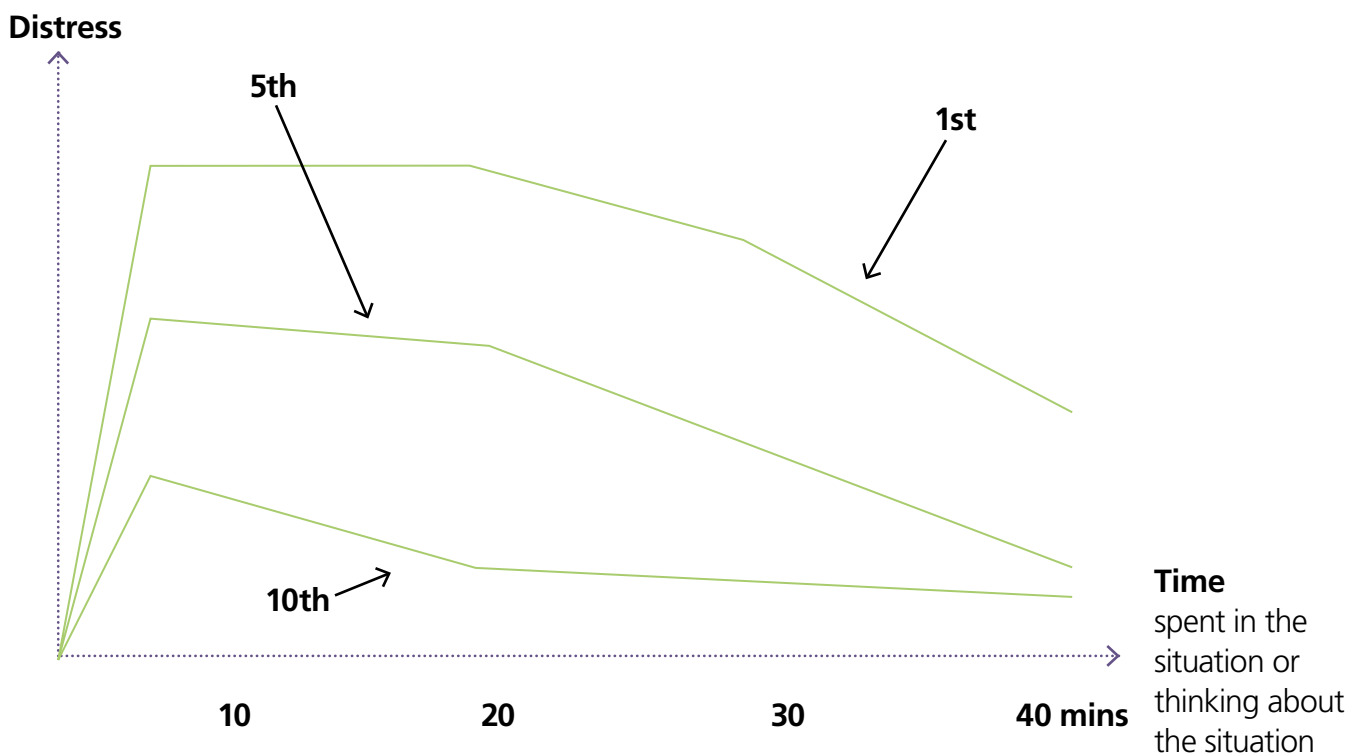
In the example below, Sharon uses a sheet to record this.

Example: Cooking tea without checking her phone.

Time in 10 minute intervals and level of distress (0-8)	10 mins	20 mins	30 mins	40 mins
<b>Day</b>				
1.	6	6	5	3
2.	6	5	4	3
3.	6	5	3	3
4.	5	4	2	2
5.	4	3	2	1
6.	3	2	2	2
7.	4	2	2	2
8.	2	2	2	1
9.	2	2	1	1
10.	2	1	1	1

Sharon (who worried excessively) had got used to a new situation (cooking tea without checking her phone). She had habituated to this situation and the feelings of distress. She had moved out of the approach/avoid cycle and got used to the situation and the feelings that showed up in this situation. Her habituation graphs looked something like this. (see overleaf)

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Each time Sharon made tea without checking her phone the distress reduced until it got to about 1 out of 10. Sharon had almost completely got used to it. She then moved on to not checking her phone when her daughter was on the way home from school – the next thing toward the deep end on her list.

## ACCEPTANCE

Having feelings we like and feelings we don't like is part of life. We have described so far how to change how you feel by altering what you do or how you do it, noticing and shifting attention and noticing and changing thoughts. However, although we have some control over how we think and feel, this is somewhat limited. Accepting this can be helpful. Or to put it another way, not accepting this can be very frustrating! Not accepting that unwanted thoughts and feelings come and go can lead to behaviours (numbing, avoiding, etc) that end up making things worse.

### WHAT IS ACCEPTANCE?

Acceptance is different from tolerance. Imagine a friend. Imagine that they tolerate you. How does that feel? Now imagine a friend and imagine they accept you. How does that feel? Did you notice a difference?

Acceptance is more like willingness. You don't have to like how you think or feel but on one level or another you can choose to accept that your mind or your brain will continue to give you a mixture of experiences (thoughts and feelings, for example) that you do and don't like or want.

Here are some practical ways to apply this idea of acceptance in everyday life.

- Label feelings:

- Write it down.
- Say it to yourself. E.g. "this is fear", "this is anger".

Explain sensations to yourself:

- "My heart rate is up and I can't concentrate because my old brain thinks I'm in real danger and is trying to help me with adrenalin and cortisol."

- Seagul analogy

- Imagine for a moment an ocean wave as it approaches the shore. It's deep and tall and has not crested yet into a breaker. Now imagine the wave is nearing a group of gulls floating on the water. The birds don't fly away. They simply ride out the facing slope, round the top and drift down the long back of the way. Emotions are wave like and time-limited. They ebb and flow. Like a wave, emotions build up, eventually reach a peak and drift away. They don't last forever even if it feels like they will. Like the seagulls you can ride waves of emotion. This may feel scary and it certainly won't stop you from feeling anything. You may think that it will go on forever or that you might drown. However, a wave is moving and it will pass by. Of course one wave is often followed by another and each time a wave comes in, notice it then practice accepting the feelings and letting the feelings come and go.



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## SUMMARY

- Feelings are normal and can be understood
- We have some control over how we feel
- We can't generally change our feelings directly but we can by:
  - Understanding our feelings and our brain
  - Changing situations
  - Changing how we behave in the same situation
  - Changing how we think
  - Changing/shifting attention
  - Accepting feelings and getting used to them

Remember with all these tips:

- Make a start
- Start small
- It will take effort and practice
- Don't expect the feelings to stop. Don't wait for them to stop before trying to get back on with life. You'll be waiting for a long time because feelings are a part of being human and being alive.

Good luck.